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SUBJECT: FRENCH DOWNPLAY SUMATE CONCERNS, OFFER NOTHING NEW  
ON SUBS

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: French MFA DAS-equivalent for South America Pinard told us March 4 it would be improper for France to try to interfere in the Venezuelan government's case against Sumate, although it would maintain "vigilance," and encourage similar EU vigilance, in following the court proceedings. Evoking double standards, he said NED funding for Sumate was no better or worse than Venezuelan financial support of Bolivian Evo Morales. As in past meetings, he argued that Venezuela remained generally free of oppression, while noting that Chavez's "hardening" and "nervousness" of recent months was receiving "growing attention" within the GOF. Although we were told that discussions on possible French submarine sales have gone "nowhere," Pinard continued to insist that Venezuela did not pose any security threat to the region and recommended that the U.S. approach Venezuela less "emotionally." End summary.

Little Concern on Sumate

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¶2. (C) In a March 4 meeting with Deputy PolCouns and Poloff, French MFA DAS-equivalent for South America Michel Pinard downplayed USG concerns about the judicial harassment of the Venezuelan NGO Sumate (ref A). Pinard argued that it was too early to determine whether the proceedings against Sumate were legitimate or politically motivated, adding that it would be inappropriate for one country to interfere in the judicial process of another before the case had a chance to play out. He similarly rejected suggestions that, at a minimum, it would be appropriate for the GOF to make known its concerns to the GOV about the case, to help ensure that it was not politically motivated. After some back and forth, Pinard assured us that the French had contact with Sumate and would remain "attentive" and "vigilant" in following the court proceedings. The judicial process should remain open, he continued, and France -- along with the EU -- would push for the right for observers to attend all hearings.

¶3. (C) Pressed further about the trumped-up charges against the Sumate leadership, Pinard evoked double standards in arguing that NED grants for Sumate did not differ in principle from Chavez's support for Evo Morales during the Bolivian presidential campaign. USG economic assistance for Europe after World War II was cited as another example. He said France treated all such electoral assistance without distinction, viewing it as "normal" in the sense of established practice. Pinard brushed aside arguments that the ultimate aim of the Venezuelan government was to draw out legal proceedings against Sumate leaders in order to prevent

them from operating freely and compel them into fleeing the country.

Democracy alive and well

¶4. (C) Pinard insisted that democracy was basically alive and well in Venezuela. The Venezuelan media was very active and relatively free, Pinard underlined, and there were no political prisoners or political oppression at the moment. If Cuban doctors were popular, it was for their work not their propaganda. Pinard judged that if the opposition were able to unite and work from within Venezuela, he would "not be surprised to see it garner 30 percent of the vote" in upcoming elections. The problem, he said, was that there were only "those who opposed," but no "opposition." He further claimed that Chavez's movement was by no means monolithic, arguing that there existed "opposition on the inside" which might one day split off and become a genuine political opposition. To back up his arguments, Pinard referred to a conference earlier in the week of academics and others, all experts on South America and Venezuela, who he claimed had all reached similar conclusions.

Chavez nonetheless nervous

¶5. (C) Deputy PolCouns, citing two recent articles in the center-right, pro-government daily Le Figaro which raised the concern that the increasing militarization of Venezuelan society was leading to authoritarianism, suggested there were other experts besides those at the conference whose views the GOF could do well to take into account. Pinard conceded that France had ascertained a general "hardening" in Chavez's positions in the last few months and that Chavez was sometimes guilty of excess. He referred to a certain "nervousness" on the part of Chavez which was attracting France's "growing attention." Pinard attributed the hardening to Chavez's taking personal umbrage over the EU's report on the December vote, despite the overall mildness of the report's findings. Speculating that the EU criticism had deprived Chavez of the emotional triumph he was seeking in an election boycotted by the opposition, Pinard speculated that this had caused Chavez to react "poorly" to European criticisms and had led to the outburst against FM Straw.

Nothing new on subs

¶6. (C) Questioned about the state of play with respect to possible French submarine sales to Venezuela, Pinard insisted that the issue was "nowhere": there were no imminent deals to be signed, and there were no negotiations taking place. He did not specify whether any French companies had formally requested permission to begin discussions of sales with Venezuela. He did state that the GOF had not engaged in any discussions about such sales. As in past meetings, he insisted that Venezuela posed no threat to regional stability even if it used militarism and energy assistance as tools for building solidarity in the region. He claimed that, militarily, Venezuela lacked enough soldiers even to patrol its long borders, whereas Colombia's army was bigger, better armed, and operationally experienced. Pinard concluded his apologia with the advice that the U.S. deal with Venezuela less "emotionally" and more "objectively."

Comment

¶7. (C) Pinard failed to acknowledge the origins and goals of the judicial harassment against Sumate and appeared impervious to USG arguments. He was no doubt hewing to the policy line on Chavez drawn by the Elysee, sometimes erring on the side of using even illogical arguments to make his case. The best USG strategy may be to push other EU countries to apply pressure on France in Brussels and Caracas.

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